

Saturday, March 2, 2013

Inside an east-west rail feasibility study

For a little more than a year, our community has been discussing an idea to explore the feasibility of an alternative rail route, aka east-west route, that would connect Humboldt Bay's deepwater seaport to the national rail network at a connection in the Sacramento valley. Throughout these discussions, people have wondered: Where will it go? How much will it cost? What are the environmental impacts? How long will it take to build? What will it carry? The truthful answer to all of those is "it will be in the feasibility study"; but what does that mean exactly?

To provide more detail into the contents of a feasibility study, we must review how we got here, who is involved and the process that has developed over the past year. The idea to explore the feasibility of an east-west rail route was promoted by a grass-roots citizens group in late 2011. To explore projects that with a positive impact on the local economy, job creation and fuller utilization of Humboldt's harbor, the city of Eureka took the lead on this study in early 2012. More than 30 local, state and federal agencies as well as edu-

cational institutions, law enforcement, business interests, labor organizations and citizen groups have joined the city.

By the fall of 2012, a multi-jurisdictional committee called the UpState RailConnect Committee, was formed through a Memorandum of Agreement between the city of Eureka, Humboldt, Trinity, and Tehama counties, the Upstate California Economic Development Council and the Northern California Tribal Chairmen's Association. Through the MOA, these agencies agreed to gather public input; review documents such as request for proposals, consultant submittals, draft and final reports; participate in consultant selection; provide consultant oversight; assist with grant writing and local technical in-kind efforts and other tasks as mutually agreed upon by the members. There is no financial obligation created on any of the member agencies.

To date, the UpState RailConnect Committee has

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met three times. The draft Scope of Work for the feasibility study presently asks for the following information:

- Identification of a proposed route and alternatives (answers where will it go)

- Identification of land ownerships

- Assessment of economic benefit of a connection to the national rail system

- Assessment of market potential (answers what will it carry)

- Assessment of community socioeconomic benefits along the proposed route

- Assessment of impact to ports

A conceptual development plan will include:

- Recommendations on ownership/governance of the rail line/rail corridor (answers who will operate it)

- Prelim engineering

- Highway/port connectors/potential stops/spurs along the route

- Outline of national security issues

- Additional uses of the corridor (fiber optic, trail, water, etc.)

- Estimated permitting needs

- Estimated environmental issues and mitigations

(answers what are the environmental impacts)

- Estimated development costs and timelines (answers how much will it cost and how long will it take to build)

All of the members of the UpState RailConnect Committee want to be sure the final Scope of Work asks the study's consultant to try and answer as many questions as possible that are important to the residents of Humboldt, Trinity and Tehama counties. Now it is your turn. If there is some question you would like to have answered that does not appear on the above list, please email the UpState RailConnect Committee at L1325@suddenlink.net. For more information, you can also review committee information on the city of Eureka's website at http://www.ci.eureka.ca.gov/depts/council/rail_study.asp.

Lance Madsen is a Eureka city councilman and UpState RailConnect committee chairman. David Hull, of David Hull and Associates, is a consultant to the city of Eureka and sits on the UpState RailConnect Committee.

Opinions expressed in My Word pieces do not necessarily reflect the editorial viewpoint of the Times-Standard.

Friday, Feb. 15, 2013

East-west railroad would be game-changer

Most Humboldters are not aware that the first operating railroad in California was built in Humboldt County in 1854. In fact, by the late 1800s, Humboldt County had more railroads than any other county in California. This was because of the need to transport large logs from the forests to the mills on or around Humboldt Bay.

The local economy ran on timber, workers and their families required fresh food, and little of that could be imported. Humboldters needed to buy food from local producers. Luckily, at that time, the Eel and Van Duzen valleys were very rich in agriculture, orchards, dairy, and sheep. Cattle ranches also dotted the coastal plain.

The problem farmers, ranchers, and timber owners faced, was to get their goods to Eureka and the nearby logging camps.

Anything transported from those areas to Eureka had to be hauled over Table Bluff by wagon, one load at a time. This was very costly in time and money, it also

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Monte Provolt

put limits on what could be shipped to the Eureka area. The problem was solved when some far-sighted people in the 1880s proposed tunneling beneath Table Bluff, and building a railroad connecting Humboldt Bay to the Eel River valley.

According to newspaper articles at the time, there were those who were against building the tunnel. Some thought the cost would be too great. Others believed it just was not possible. Despite the opposition, the tunnel proponents went ahead with the project.

Soon they had a tunnel through to Loleta. The railroad was built to the Eel River valley and from that point forward goods could be transported efficiently to the logging camps, the deep water port in Eureka and shipped out to the rest of the world.

Compare the situation they faced then, to our modern era in Humboldt County. Geographically, nothing

has changed. Just as in the 1880s, we live on a deep water port, but have no efficient way to bring goods to it for export. Everything grown and made east and south of Humboldt must still be hauled across the coast range, one truckload at a time.

The extra costs in time and money makes it too expensive to consider shipping from Humboldt Bay to other Pacific Rim markets. In this way, there are many similarities between the Loleta tunnel project of the 1880s and the proposed east-west railroad of today. Connecting our deep water port to the Sacramento Valley and the national rail system would not only revitalize the economy of Humboldt County, but all of the northern half of California would experience an economic boost.

That is why so many people today wonder if an east-west railroad could be built.

Certainly there are many obstacles a project such as a new railroad would have to surmount. The logical first step is to do a feasibility study. This effort not only

could identify potential users, but could also show possible impacts to the economy. In addition, route alternatives, environmental concerns, and related issues could be evaluated.

If this route were to be built it would be the first time that the Port of Humboldt would be directly connected to the eastern markets, without first having to travel over 300 miles south before making its way to the national rail system. The time and cost savings will be substantial and would pose a competitive advantage for the Port of Humboldt.

These facts alone warrant having a feasibility study done.

If you support the idea of rail returning to Humboldt County, tell your representatives you support having a feasibility study done, and ask why some officials are fighting so hard to stop the study.

Monte Provolt is a member of the East-West Rail Advocates, an ad hoc citizens' group, and resides in Eureka.

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